Fighting Time: Gregg Centre and Royal Canadian Engineers Join Forces to Record New Brunswick’s Past

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On 18 and 19 April 2005, members of 41 and 42 Squadrons of 4 Engineer Support Regiment (4 ESR) from Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Gagetown and employees of the City of Saint John joined forces with faculty and graduate students from the University of New Brunswick’s Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society. The task was to remove the thick blanket of time from the 19th century Red Head coastal defence battery that once guarded the vital harbour at Saint John, New Brunswick. The blanket consisted of over 100 years of dense underbrush, including tangles of alder bushes, thick belts of weeds, brambles, and thorny sharp raspberry cane. As the growth was removed, what had looked to be only a small hill with a few stones lying scattered about transformed into a large carefully-constructed earthen, brick and cut-stone coastal fort, some 150 metres long and 40 metres wide.

Since 2000, the Gregg Centre has run study tours for UNB graduate students of NB battlefields and military heritage sites, in a local adaptation of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation Study Tour program. The Red Head Battery stand was part of the “Saint John Coastal Defences From 1640 – 1950” tour, run with the help of Roger Sarty, a history professor at Wilfrid Laurier University. After two visits in three years, the threat of erosion to the site was clear, launching Gregg Centre Director Marc Milner and his staff into action.

Only the Red Head Battery remains as a reminder of the time when the British North American colonies began to unify for collective defence and take their first steps towards protecting their sovereignty (see Sarty, Milner, Knight article in this issue for more on Red Head’s remarkable history). Unfortunately, in the 140 years since the Battery was built, the world-renowned, powerful tides of the Bay of Fundy have battered the loose gravel bank beneath the headland. Each winter loose stones and more of the bank fall 40 to 50 feet down to the beach below and are swept away by the surf. By 2005, the bank had eroded all the way to the fort’s earth parapet. It is only a matter of time before the entire Red Head Battery falls into the bay.

Therefore, the aim of the “Red Head Battery Project” was to clear the site of brush so that it could be surveyed and photographed. Few period plans remain of this one-of-a-kind fort. In addition, all other gun positions of the same vintage on both Canadian coasts were either dismantled to make room for more modern 20th century defences or built over as port cities grew. This made the task of recording the site all the more imperative and valuable, not just for New Brunswick’s history, but for Canadian military history also.

Thankfully, John Flood and Sons (1961) Ltd, the land owners who are well known in the Saint John community and construction world, were most eager to help, and granted complete access to the site. Former UNB student and archaeologist Chris Blair joined the team to determine how to clear the Battery without disturbing the integrity and ecosystem of the delicate coastal bank, and
to help dig archaeological “test pits” to reveal clues about the fort's construction. Once he had determined that trimming back the choked and dead alder growth would actually help regenerate the root structure and stabilize the headland, the plan to clear and survey the site was put in motion. Arrangements in Saint John, with the Floods, the City and local media were all handled deftly by Bob Lockhart, a UNB graduate student who is also the former mayor of Saint John and a one-time local media mogul.

One large problem remained – clearing the thick brush required workers skilled in the use of chainsaws, and enough fuel, trucks, safety equipment, and time to commit to the project. Fortunately, the Gregg Centre’s close ties with the Army at CFB Gagetown meant that when the call for help went out, the Royal Canadian Engineers of 4 ESR quickly volunteered two days of their valuable time. (They also helped the UNB’s Geodesy and Geomatics Department survey the site once it was cleared.) The City of Saint John reinforced the brush cutting “combat team” with a chipper, tractor, and an able crew, while UNB graduate students made valuable coffee runs.

The project at Red Head Battery was a key part of the Gregg Centre’s New Brunswick Military Heritage Project (NBMHP), which promotes local and national awareness about the province’s role in national military history. The two days’ work at Red Head drew tremendous local and regional media interest. The coverage led a local teacher to incorporate the story into a social sciences lesson for his grade five students. After a class session, they visited the Battery site and put their “boots on the ground” – young historians in the making. The media coverage of the Red Head project prompted a visit by Parks Canada’s regional archeologist in the days after the clearing. Apparently the site was completely unknown to them, and UNB was complimented for its work. Later that summer a field camp from the UNB Department of Geodesy and Geomatics Engineering surveyed the site, and Dr. Peter Dare and his department processed the data to produce the plan.

Another positive result of bringing attention to what is soon to be lost was to raise the profile of other military heritage sites in Saint John, which still can be saved. In particular, Partridge Island, on the opposite side of the harbour, contains defensive works dating from the 1790s, and which were operative through to the Cold War, in addition to a major quarantine station and an immigrant hospital. Plans are now being discussed to protect and to develop the island into a major historic attraction.

What follows is the photographic record of the battle fought by the Royal Canadian Engineers and the Gregg Centre to liberate the Red Head Battery from the underbrush, revealing its protective ramparts to the sun and the eyes of New Brunswickers one last time.

### Notes

1. The Gregg Centre was created in 2006 by unifying the University of New Brunswick’s Military and Strategic Studies Program and the Centre for Conflict Studies. The Red Head Battery Project began in 2004 as an MSS Program initiative.
Top left: Making progress slowly. Once cut, the heavy alder bush cover on the battery had to be disposed of safely. To clear the site for survey and to prevent the threat of fire from brush piles, the City of Saint John crew ground the cuttings into wood chips, which were then spread evenly across the site to compost.

Centre left: Pieces of the fort slowly begin to appear out of the obscuring blanket of brush and scrub.

Below: Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Dickson (left), Commanding Officer of 4 ESR, surveys the first day’s progress with the Detachment Commander on the job site, Sergeant David Camp. Currently, Sgt. Camp is serving with Task Force Afghanistan.

Bottom left: Dr. Marc Milner, briefs 4 ESR’s command team on the cutting work still required. From left after Dr. Milner are LCol Dickson, Sgt. Camp, Captain John Timmerman, Officer Commanding of 41 Engineer Squadron, which provided most of the sappers and equipment. With his back to the camera is the ever-watchful Regimental Sergeant Major of 4 ESR, Chief Warrant Officer Paul Hartinger.
Left: As the first day of work wears on, the battle against the New Brunswick alders turns in the Sappers’ favour and the Red Head Battery begins to appear from under the brush encasement. Visible on the right is one of two heavily overgrown expense magazines. The clear, warm weather of April in New Brunswick enabled the workers to make relatively fast work of clearing the brush.

Below left: A 4 ESR Sapper, armed with a chain saw and protective gear, mounts one of the two expense magazines to continue the battle with the brush.

Below right: At midday of day one, this shot from the centre of the beachhead of cleared land reveals not just the work done already, but also the work remaining to liberate the fort despite intense alder resistance.

Left: Red Head Battery’s front line with Mother Nature and the powerful tides of the Bay of Fundy. Built in the 1860s, the fort originally was several dozen yards from the edge of the bank. Nearly a century and a half of Fundy tides and surf battered the bank so that the number 1 gun position is now on the verge of collapsing into the Bay.
Day two - A fort appears: Sgt David Camp stands in front of expense magazine number 2 between the fourth and fifth gun positions.

By day two, the struggle against the alder bushes is nearly won. Visible in this photo are the multitude of stumps left on site. Surface growth cut from the Battery was nearly all dead. The hardened dead wood ground down saw blades, forcing two skilled Sappers to work constantly at sharpening saws and to rotate them into the hands of the cutting crew.
At the end of the first day, sappers from 4 ESR and Gregg Centre staff take a history break. They are gathered in gun position number 4 in the midst of the increasingly visible fort to listen to Dr. Roger Sarty explain the significance of the unique site and the importance of surveying and recording its existence.

The Red Head Battery Project Team including Sergeant Camp's detachment from 4 ESR, the City of Saint John chipper crew front and centre, UNB's Gregg Centre Director, Dr. Marc Milner in brown on the right. On the far left stand authors Lee Ellen Pottie and Lee Windsor. Dr. Roger Sarty, project historian and specialist in the maritime defence of Canada, stands in the centre. In the rear is 52 Charlie, a 4 ESR Light Support Vehicle Wheeled which, like many of the sappers, recently returned from the Canadian mission to Haiti.